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Consumer Misbehavior: A Concurrent Look at the Impact That the Size of the Victim and the Size of the Loss Have on Opinions Regarding the Acceptance or Unacceptance of 12 Questionable Consumer Actions

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This study examines the role that the size of a victimized organization and the size of the victim's loss have on attitudes regarding the acceptance or unacceptance of 12 questionable consumer actions. A sample of 815 American adults rated each scenario on a scale anchored by very acceptable and very unacceptable. It was shown that the size of the victimized organization tends to influence consumers' opinions with more disdain directed towards consumers who take advantage of smaller businesses. Similarly, the respondents tended to be more critical of these actions when the loss incurred by the victimized organization was large. A 2x2 matrix concurrently delineated the nature of the extent to which opinions regarding the 12 actions differed depending upon the mediating variable under scrutiny.

Introduction

According to many, ethical behavior is predicated upon doing the *right thing*. In this regard, it is not necessarily about abiding by the law, rather it is a question of whether or not the action under scrutiny was appropriate. As such, academicians have expended considerable energy over the years in an ongoing effort to identify both the propensity of business entities to engage in questionable actions and to ascertain the public's perception of a myriad of specific questionable actions. As might be expected, the vast majority of the scrutiny on ethics in the business environment has been placed on business organizations. But more recently, we have witnessed a significant growth in the stream of research that addresses questionable actions undertaken by consumers.

Consumer ethics has emerged as a fertile area for those interested in exploring the synergistic relationship that is commonly sought within the buyer/seller dyad. It seems reasonable to presume that much of this scrutiny can be attributed to the reality that marketers have witnessed a shift in the prevailing business paradigm. More specifically, we have seen a transition away from transaction-based marketing to one that emphasizes long term relationships. Whether referred to as relationship marketing or customer relationship management (CRM), the focus is on customer retention rather than customer acquisition. In this regard, one of the basic tenets of the strategies designed to nurture customer retention is that of trust.

Books dating as far back as Upton Sinclair's (1905) *The Jungle* and Stuart Chase and F. J. Schlink's (1927) *Your Money's Worth* have long brought the perceived abuses of consumers to the forefront of public consciousness. For these consumer advocates, the concept of *caveat emptor* – or let the buyer beware – was simply unacceptable. Consequently, business ethics has long represented an appropriate topic for these advocates as well as the media, the government, and academicians to scrutinize. But trust is not a one-way phenomenon. In an era of CRM, it is not uncommon for a business entity to purge undesirables from its list of customers. For instance, customers who repeatedly return items to a retailer may be removed from the retailer's mailing list. Likewise, those who write bad checks or fail to make scheduled payments on their accounts may be expunged from the marketer's list of customers with whom they would like to do business. But an unfortunate reality is that there is a segment of society that thinks that the concept of *caveat venditor* – or let the seller beware – should prevail. Relationship-based marketing dictates that neither philosophy can be embraced. Otherwise, any relationship is destined for a premature demise. Much like a personal relationship between a husband and wife, if there is reason for distrust, or if one takes advantage of the other, then separation is likely to be forthcoming.

In comparison to the body of literature on the business side of this relationship, there is considerably less research that has examined the consumer side of the buyer-seller dyad (Vitell 2003). This study will address that deficiency by focusing on the consumer side. However, it differs from virtually every other study on consumer ethics in one key respect. Namely, it addresses the issues of *degree of harm* and the *size of the victim*. Thus, it adds two dimensions that have only recently begun to be directly scrutinized in the consumer ethics literature. Does the level of harm inflicted upon the victimized organization or the size of the victim mediate an individual's perception of how acceptable or unacceptable a questionable consumer action is? And what is the nature of the two predictor variables' interaction regarding consumer opinions?

Literature Review

This review comprises three sections. First is a brief look at research regarding the broad realm of consumer ethics. Next is a review of the few studies that have examined the size of the victim's loss. The final component is a review of those studies which purport to examine the role that the size of the victim plays in the assessment of attitudes regarding ethically questionable behavior (EQB).

Consumer Ethics

It is fair to say that there have been significantly fewer attempts to assess the ethics of a myriad of potentially questionable behaviors undertaken by consumers in comparison to businesses. Consider the following statement which was put forth almost 30 years ago, just as we began to see the body of research on consumer ethics emerge: consumers are "out-doing business and the government at unethical behavior" (Bernstein, 1985, p. 24). It was this reality that led Hirschman (1991) to speak of the *dark side of consumer behavior*. More recently, Mitchell, Balabanis, Schlegelmilch, and Cornwell (2009, p. 395) echoed that same sentiment when offering their assertion that "consumers are not only victimized, but are also victimizers." With just this cursory look at the two sides of the buyer/seller dyad, it is evident that each group sees the other as capable of – if not prone to – engage in actions that would be characterized as *not doing the right thing*. This uncertainty, as it relates to the actions of consumers in the marketplace, provides the impetus to expand the body of research germane to consumer ethics.

Research on consumer ethics has increased substantially over the past 30 years. Interestingly, many of the earliest efforts focused on illegal actions and an array of fraudulent actions (Wilkes 1978) such as shoplifting (Cox, Cox, and Moschis 1990), counterfeiting (Albers-Miller 1999), insurance fraud (Tennyson 2002), and fraudulent return activity – a practice recently characterized today as *deshopping* or *retail borrowing* (Harris 2008). In regard to retail borrowing, a recent study looked at consumer returns in light of increasingly liberal return policies (Wachter, Vitell, Shelton, and Park 2012). That study identified three segments of returners, namely the planned/unethical returner, the eager returner, and the reluctant/educated returner. Clearly, the planned/unethical and eager returner groups represent a dilemma for today's marketers as they seek to implement policies that appeal to their entire array of target markets.

In light of the emerging trend towards a less interactive retail environment with fewer customer service representatives and wider adoption of self-service checkouts, it can reasonably be stated that consumers now have more of an opportunity to engage in questionable actions, perhaps even with less fear of getting caught. In her assessment of why consumers engage in *questionable behavior in consumption*, Fukukawa (2002, p. 99) stated that *opportunity* is indeed one of several "antecedents of ethically questionable behavior (EQB)." Fukukawa also spoke of *perceived unfairness* as an antecedent to EQB; in this regard, a consumer might justify actions such as the unauthorized download of music from a renegade Internet site based on the premise that the action simply served to redress a perceived imbalance that tilted the relationship in favor of the marketer. Thus the action is simply one way by which the consumer can level the so-called playing field.

In recent years, the issue of the presence of an identifiable victim has been explored. Previous research has indicated that individuals are less critical of questionable consumer actions when there is no discernible victim. While this is a comparatively new focus within the realm of consumer ethics, it has long been explored within the sociology literature. Addressing the issue of *neutralization*, Sykes and Matza (1957) investigated ways in which individuals can justify *non-normative* behavior. Using this *non-normative* construct, Grove, Vitell, and Strutton (1989) developed a model that created a framework by which the underlying rationale for unethical behavior on the part of consumers could be evaluated; in essence, it focused on ways by which consumers could justify their own questionable actions. Among the neutralizing rationales cited was the *denial of the existence of a victim*. Within this context, one study that featured a series of scenarios similar to those used in the current study identified two latent factors or dimensions – those actions that produce *direct economic consequences* (such as keeping excess change) and those that result in *imperceptible economic consequences* (such as returning a product to a store other than the one where it was purchased) (Dodge, Edwards and Fullerton 1996). Similar results were found by Vitell and Muncy (1992) who reported that the level of acceptance of an action was related to the *degree of harm* inflicted upon the victim. In this regard, their research identified four categories of activities that are inextricably tied to the harm criterion. These four were: (1) actively benefiting from illegal activities; (2) passively benefiting; (3) actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices; and (4) no harm/no foul. From a similar, albeit slightly different perspective, a second article by Muncy and Vitell (1992) addressed the existence of a question of a breach of ethics on the part of the consumer based on three considerations; specifically it addressed the locus of fault, the presence of deception on the part of the consumer, and the degree of harm borne by the victimized organization. The common denominator in these two studies was the degree of harm construct.

Consideration of the *no harm/no foul* criterion put forward by Vitell and Muncy (1992) led Harris (2008) to posit that when one's perception is that fraudulent returning has no significant impact on a retailer, then the propensity for that individual consumer to engage in such behavior increases accordingly. Similarly, it might be argued that the purchase of a counterfeit item is consistent with the idea that there is no discernible victim (Aroq Limited 2003). But in looking at this behavior, it was found that it is not so much the absence of a victim, rather it is the consumers' materialistic inclination that influences their overall ethical predisposition thereby producing a greater tendency to engage in the practice of purchasing counterfeit items (Kozar and Marcketti 2011). That study also reported that consumers who were unaware of the illegal standing of the purchase of counterfeits, irrespective of their ethical inclination, were more likely to engage in this questionable behavior. Along these same lines, a recent study explored consumers' tendencies to make unauthorized copies and translations of anime (Japanese animation) and distributing it via peer-to-peer networks such as YouTube (Lee 2010). The author reported that respect for the proprietary nature of these intellectual properties is on the decline. This eroding ethical inclination regarding intellectual properties again points out the situational nature of consumer ethics while stressing the need for marketers to be concerned regarding the many facets of consumer misbehavior. Findings such as these are consistent with Witkowski and Reddy's (2010) assertion that such breaches of ethical conduct inhibit both *sustainable consumption* and *consumer responsibility*.

Size of the Victimized Organization's Loss

The next component of this review addresses the research regarding the role that the size of the loss inflicted upon victimized organization plays in a consumer's assessment of the appropriateness of a given action. In other words, is the acceptability of an action such as the consumer's decision to keep too much change that was returned in the transaction process influenced by whether the loss incurred by the organization, thus the gain attained by the perpetrator, is considered to be large or small? While there has been a meaningful growth in the body of research focused on consumer ethics over the past 30 years, research that addresses the size of the loss incurred by the victim is virtually nonexistent. Yet there is enough insight such that some perspective is attainable. But in saying this, it is incumbent to note that little research has explicitly examined the size of the gain, rather it has referred to the aforementioned question surrounding the existence of an identifiable victim. Thus, it is more likely to address the size of the victim rather than the gain. This issue will be more thoroughly addressed in the next section of the literature review.

Noted earlier was the study where Fukukawa (2002) spoke of *perceived unfairness* as an antecedent to EQB; in this regard, a consumer might be able to neutralize the negative perception and justify a non-normative behavior. As stated, the action is simply one way by which the consumer can overcome the organization's unfair advantage. The implication is that the organization is not perceived to be a victim. Fullerton, Kerch and Dodge (1996) developed a typology for consumer transgressions using their *consumer ethics index (CEI)*. They identified four segments of American consumers which were labeled as permissives, situationalists, conformists, and puritans. The authors concluded that while consumers appear to possess relatively high expectations regarding the behavior of their peers in the marketplace, there are a significant number of individuals who are prone to adopt a philosophy of *caveat venditor.* An extension of that study corroborated the higher ethical disposition among American consumers while concurrently noting that the criticism of the action in question was less severe when the economic consequences incurred by the victim were insignificant (Dodge, Edwards, and Fullerton 1996). But the authors made no overt attempt to differentiate between large and small losses, thus the question regarding the role it plays was not directly answered. More recently, authors have addressed the issue of *guilt*. Steenhaut and Van Kenhove (2006) surmised that higher levels of *perceived guilt* were associated with higher ethical intentions. One could assume that higher losses would likely increase the level of guilt felt by some consumers. In fact, the authors concluded that a marketer's ability to make the interpersonal consequences more salient might reduce the propensity of the consumer to behave in a questionable manner.

As seen in the preceding paragraphs, there have been some tangential associations between the likelihood that the victimized organization would or would not suffer based on the loss sustained and the acceptance or rejection of certain questionable consumer actions. However, these associations were more likely to be predicated upon the size of the victim rather than the size of the loss. Thus, even a large loss plausibly would not be viewed as harshly because it might not be perceived to be inflicting harm. In this regard, it has been stated that we might need to define deviant customer behavior from a harm-based perspective (Fisk et al 2010). Indeed, there has been some interest in this phenomenon. Fullerton and Neale (2011) conducted a study of American consumers using the same 12 scenarios used in the current study. They found statistically significant differences on seven of the 12 questionable actions. In each case, the level of disapproval was more pronounced when a larger loss was imposed upon the victimized organization.

Size of the Victim

The final component of this review addresses the research regarding the role that the size of the victimized organisation plays in a consumer's assessment of the appropriateness of a given action. In other words, is the acceptability of an action such as the consumer's decision to keep too much change that was returned in the transaction process influenced by whether the victim was a large organisation or a small organisation? While there has been a meaningful growth in the body of research focused on consumer ethics over the past 30 years, research that addresses the size of the victim is virtually nonexistent. But some insight can be gleaned from the existing literature.

Perhaps the most pertinent research on this topic was not specifically focused on the size of the victim per se; rather it was predicated upon the consumers' ability to identify a victim. Two earlier mentioned studies apply within this context. Vitell and Muncy (1992) spoke of *no harm – no foul*, and Dodge, Edwards and Fullerton (1996) put forth the concept of *imperceptible economic consequences*. Conceivably, consumers might not experience any angst regarding a particular behavior if there is no perceived victim, and this mindset is more likely to exist when the targeted organisation is more substantial in size. This thinking is consistent with the idea of *neutralization* as put forth by sociologists (Sykes and Matza 1957) and marketers (Grove, Vitell, and Strutton 1989) alike.

Despite the noted paucity of research on this aspect of consumer misbehavior, it has been addressed on a limited basis. The first study of this ilk looked at issues germane to counterfeit items. It was conducted during the timeframe when Napster and other emerging Websites provided a mechanism by which peer-to-peer transfers of copyrighted intellectual properties, namely music, could be completed without compensation to the rightful owners. It found that those who admitted to engaging in this type of transfer had a lower level of ethical concern in general, that they had a greater willingness to embrace ethically questionable behavior, and – as it relates to this component of the literature review – that downloaders were more likely to believe that their act of downloading a file did not adversely impact the copyright owners, specifically the recording company and the artist (Levin, Dato-on, and Rhee 2004). In this regard, the authors noted that downloaders thought these large music distributers were making "excessive profits." A more recent study looked at a different category of counterfeit products, namely fashion merchandise. The authors documented a relationship between one's proclivity to purchase counterfeit items and their attitude towards "big-business." The authors' suggestion was that the decision to engage in this type of purchase, that is to say knowingly purchasing a knockoff, is more acceptable when the victimized organisation is large (Carpenter and Edwards 2013). This finding is consistent with earlier research by Eckhart, Belk, and Devinney (2010).

Within the context of marketing, two other studies are both noteworthy and relevant to the issue of the victim's size. Callen-Marchione and Owen (2008, p. 368) stated that the *denial of injury* premise might be invoked thereby justifying shoplifting on the basis that "this store is so big; no one will ever notice that one blouse is missing." A similar argument was put forth by Harris (2008) who posited that when a consumer believes that the fraudulent returning of goods has no significant impact on the retailer, then the propensity for that individual consumer to engage in such behavior increases accordingly. This is likely more commonplace when the intended victim is large in size. Both of these scenarios can be viewed as extensions of Vitell and Muncy's (1992) no harm – no foul criterion as a justification of one's questionable action.

The penultimate article addressed here is one that focused specifically on the size of the victimized organisation as an influencing phenomenon regarding the consumers' opinions regarding the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the same 12 specific questionable consumer actions utilized in the current study. Some of the actions examined were illegal such as inflating one's losses on an insurance claim, but most were legal. An example of a legal, yet questionable behavior is that of *showrooming* – that is shopping and acquiring information about a product, then purchasing that product from a cheaper source such as a virtual storefront on the Internet. Using alternative versions of the 12 scenarios, the authors were able to document a statistically significant difference among American consumers – based solely on the size of the victimized organisation – for eight of the twelve actions (Fullerton and Neale 2012). Their conclusion was that size matters.

In closing this section of the literature review, it is noteworthy to document an earlier study that addressed the size issue. In coining the term *Robin Hood Syndrome*, Nill and Schultz (1996) addressed the issue of the redistribution of wealth from the rich companies to the poor consumers as justification – or neutralization – supporting the belief that it was acceptable to take from big businesses. Thus it appears that there is a modicum of support in the extant literature supporting the premise that the size of the victimized organisation does influence the public's opinion regarding the acceptance of a particular questionable consumer action.

Research Objectives

Essentially, there are three objectives for the current study. First is that of determining the nature of any relationship between the prevailing attitudes regarding the acceptance or rejection of an ethically questionable behavior and the size of the loss incurred by the victimized organization. Second is the objective of identifying the nature of the relationship between the prevailing attitudes regarding the acceptance or rejection of an ethically questionable behavior and the size of the victimized organization. The final objective is to determine the extent to which the two predictor variables exhibit a potentially synergistic impact on consumer attitudes regarding each of the 12 behaviors under scrutiny.

Methodology

A survey was designed to collect data from American adults. The initial stage of the research was to develop a questionnaire which included a set of ethically controversial consumer actions. Upon review of the existing literature, the set of scenarios used by Fullerton and Neale (2010) was adopted. The set of 12 items includes scenario-based vignettes featuring behaviors that have been extensively addressed in literature (i.e., exaggerating losses on an insurance claim), as well as some issues that have emerged in relatively recent years (i.e., purchasing a counterfeit item). It also encompasses a wide spectrum of controversial actions, ranging from those classified as illegal (i.e., stealing from one's employer) to those actions that are legal but potentially controversial (i.e., seeking information from a retailer and purchasing the item elsewhere). In short, the survey incorporates a variety of potentially controversial consumer actions which make it possible to address consumer ethics in the American market from a multitude of perspectives.

In order to examine the influence of the size of the loss incurred by the victimized organization on consumer judgment, a measure of the victim's loss was incorporated within each scenario. The loss suffered by the business was explicitly stated in using monetary terms. A split ballot approach was used in which half of the respondents saw controversial scenarios with a small loss associated with the action while the other half saw the same scenarios with a significant loss to the business. For example, for a consumer's action of keeping extra change mistakenly given at a store, half of the respondents saw the consumer in the scenario taking extra change amounting to \$0.50, while the other half saw it amounting to \$20. The loss suffered by the victimized organization was incorporated in a similar fashion across all twelve scenarios. In summary, there were six high-loss and six low-loss scenarios for each version of the survey. The conditions were reversed on the 12 scenarios on the second version of the questionnaire.

This approach was replicated for the size of the organization. On each version of the survey, six large and six small victims were designated. It is important to note that no organizational brands were used in the vignettes; terms such as the small corner dairy, the family-owned drug store, and a large national chain were used as surrogates for organizational size. The combination of the two size variables resulted in four versions of the survey. Each version had three scenarios with each unique combination of predictor variables: large victim-large loss; large victim-small loss; small victim-large loss; and small victim-large loss. A third-party scenario was employed for each behavior. That is, the 12 vignettes used in this study described actions undertaken by a third party, including a co-worker, a neighbor, an acquaintance, and so on. Thus, respondents were asked to evaluate someone else's behavior, not their own. A balanced, forced six-point rating scale was provided for respondents to rate the behavior. The scale was anchored by the polar adjectives of *very acceptable* and *very unacceptable*. The questionnaire ended with a series of seven typical demographic questions using a multiple choice format.

The target population was American consumers over the age of 18. Using the panel maintained by eRewards, data were collected from 815 adults. Criteria were established in an effort to insure that there was adequate representation by consumers residing in different regions of the United States as well an adequate representation of the population on the bases of gender, age, income, educational attainment, marital status, ethnicity, and family size. Prospective respondents were sent an email alerting them to the survey and explaining their incentive for providing a complete response. That incentive was a credit (denominated in dollars) that would accrue to the respondents' account attained as a panel participant. These "dollars" can be redeemed by the panel member for select incentives such as Delta Airlines frequent flier miles and discount coupons for purchases from Omaha Steaks.

The Internet-based protocol that was used facilitated the collection of meaningful data. Respondents were required to answer each question before moving on – resulting in negligible missing data. Furthermore, the survey protocol checked for the *veracity* of the responses, that is to say that it dropped any respondent who *straight-lined* the 12 attitudinal scales (i.e.

answered all 12 of the questions with the same number) from the final sample. One additional, and significant, constraint was imposed for a competed questionnaire to be deemed acceptable. A minimum time was established by the authors as the benchmark for ascertaining whether or not the respondent had taken an adequate amount of time to fully consider each question and complete the 19 question survey. Any survey completed in less time than that benchmark was excluded from the database. To control for order effects, the sequence of the 12 behaviors was randomized and presented to the respondents in a myriad of different patterns.

The initial data analysis involved the calculation of the t-tests for independent samples for each of the predictor variables. Did the size of the victim's loss influence attitudes regarding the acceptance of each of the 12 behaviors? Did the size of the victim influence those opinions? Next, based upon the aforementioned results, a 2x2 matrix was used to summarize an assessment of the concurrent roles that the two size variables played in influencing the respondents' prevailing attitudes regarding how acceptable or unacceptable each of the 12 EQBs was in the minds of the general consumer under specific size-based circumstances.

Results

The results will be presented in three sections germane to the three research objectives. It begins with a look at how the size of the victimized organization's loss impacts the public's perception of how unacceptable a particular EQB is. Next, it looks at how the size of the victim influences the opinions regarding each of the EQBs. It concludes with the results of the concurrent look at the two predictor variables in an effort to draw some fundamental conclusions about how potential interaction.

Size of the Victimized Organization's Loss

This takes us to the initial objective, that of determining whether the size of the loss incurred by the victim influences the level of acceptance or rejection associated with each of the 12 consumer actions. As can be seen in Table 1, significant differences were documented for seven of the 12 scenarios. In each of these cases, respondents were more critical when the financial consequences of the action under scrutiny were higher. Alternatively stated, those behaviors where the higher cost was inflicted upon the victim, thereby reflecting a greater gain for the perpetrator, were deemed to be more unacceptable by the respondents.

Of note is the fact that of the six most strongly criticized actions that comprise the initial cluster, fully five exhibited a statistically significant difference. Among those six, only the act of returning worn clothing for a refund was viewed similarly irrespective of the magnitude of the loss incurred. The five scenarios where larger losses produced more disdain were the two illegal acts of stealing from one's employer and inflating losses on an insurance claim. The other three strongly rejected behaviors where significant differences were documented were for legal, but unacceptable, consumer actions. These included keeping extra change, not reporting a shoplifter, and fibbing to receive an undeserved senior citizen discount. Two additional, but less criticized, scenarios also produced statistically significant differences. They are returning to a store multiple times to purchase items for which a limited number of items can be bought in a single transaction and knowingly purchasing a mispriced item.

In addition to the act of returning worn clothing for a refund, four other actions were not viewed any differently. These actions were those of returning an item to a store other than the one where it was originally purchased, borrowing a museum membership card so as to avoid paying an admission fee, knowingly purchasing a counterfeit item, and using information from a full service retailer to make a more informed decision while purchasing the item from a lower-priced source (showrooming). The results of the t-tests are presented in Table 1. It should be noted that the behaviors have been sorted from most unacceptable to most acceptable and placed into four clusters based on their grand means.

Table 1. Mean Level of Acceptance – Low versus High Loss Incurred by Victimized Entity

	Loss Incurred			
Questionable Action	**Low**	**High**	**Diff.**	**sig.**
Stealing from One's Employer	2.53	1 .26	+1.27	.000
Inflating Insurance Claim	2.64	1.36	+1.28	.000
Return Worn Clothing for Refund	2.05	2.07	+0.64	.000
Not Report Shoplifter	2.57	1.75	+0.82	.000
Fibbing to Receive Sr. Discount	2.32	2.06	+0.26	.001
Returning Item to Wrong Store	2.66	2.64	+0.02	.817
Borrow Museum Membership Card	2.61	2.77	- 0.16	.109
Purchase Counterfeit Jewelry	3.09	3.07	+0.02	.840
Multiple Purchase of Limited Q Item	3.61	2.57	+1.04	.000
Purchase Mispriced Item	3.55	2.85	+0.70	.000
Showrooming	4.52	4.56	- 0.04	.657

Size of the Victimized Organization

This leads to the second objective, that of determining whether the size of the victim influences the level of acceptance or rejection associated with each of the 12 consumer actions. For all twelve actions, the observed difference in the two means was positive thereby providing anecdotal evidence that the actions are more likely to be criticized when the victim is small. And as shown in Table 2, statistically significant differences were documented for eight of the 12 scenarios. Based on the direction of the observed differences, it can be concluded that respondents were in fact more critical of these eight actions when the victimized organization was characterized as small. Of note is the fact that of the six most strongly criticized actions that make up the initial cluster in Table 2, only two exhibited statistically significant differences when stratified on the basis of the victim's size as described in the scenario. Only the acts of keeping extra change and not reporting a shoplifter were viewed differently based upon the size of the victimized organization. In each case where statistically significant differences were documented, respondents were more critical of the action when the victimized organization was deemed to be small. Interestingly, these two behaviors could be viewed as *inaction rather than an overt action* that causes the organization to be harmed. This outcome is somewhat consistent with Muncy and Vitell's (1992) delineation of acts that reflect a situation where the consumer exhibits a passive behavior. Also noteworthy is the fact that all four of the non-significant differences involved behaviors falling within this set of the six most criticized behaviors under scrutiny. The overt actions of stealing from one's employer, inflating one's losses in an insurance claim, returning worn clothing for a refund (deshopping), and fibbing in order to receive an undeserved senior citizen discount were all deemed to be equally unacceptable irrespective of the size of the victimized organization.

All six actions comprising the three remaining clusters exhibited statistically significant differences. These behaviors include returning a product to a store other than where it was purchased, borrowing a friend's museum membership card to avoid an entrance fee, knowingly purchasing a counterfeit item, returning to a store multiple times to purchase a limited quantity sale item, and showrooming. Furthermore, when assessing the three clusters that exclude the six most criticized behaviors, an interesting progression was apparent. As a consequence, grand means for the differences between the two sample means for all four clusters were calculated. For the most criticized set of actions, the grand mean was .15; for the second cluster, it was .30. For the moderately rejected set of actions, the grand mean was .45. The final item was the only one that was deemed to be acceptable. Interestingly, the difference between the two means was .63. Thus, a progression from one cluster to the next appears to be evident with a greater impact of victim size associated with the less onerous behaviors. Table 2 summarizes these results.

Table 2. Mean Level of Acceptance –Large versus Small Victimized Organization

	Victim Size			
Questionable Action	Large	Small	Diff.	sig.
Stealing from One's Employer	1.96	1.84	+0.12	.083
Inflating Loss on Insurance Claim	2.05	1.95	+0.20	.105
Returning Worn Clothing for Refund	2.13	1.99	+0.14	.081
Keeping Extra Change	2.21	2.05	+0.16	.000
Not Report Shoplifter	2.25	2.08	+0.17	.019
Fib to Receive Sr. Discount	2.25	2.14	+0.11	.148
Returning Item to Wrong Store	2.85	2.46	+0.30	.000
Borrow Museum Membership Card	2.79	2.59	+0.20	.023
Purchase Counterfeit Jewelry	3.28	2.88	+0.40	.000
Multiple Purchase of Limited Q Item	3.41	2.77	+0.64	.000
Purchase Mispriced Item	3.36	3.04	+0.32	.002
Showrooming	4.86	4.23	+0.63	.000

A Concurrent Look at the Two Size Variables'

Relationship with Consumer Attitudes

The final research objective addresses that of taking a simultaneous look at the impact of the two size variables so as to determine whether they have a similar or different impact on the attitudes regarding each of the 12 EQBs. Of the 12 consumer actions, four were impacted by both of the size variables in ways that would have been anticipated. That is to say that both a large loss and a small victim resulted in stronger condemnation of the EQB in question. Specifically, keeping extra change, not reporting a shoplifter, returning to store to make multiple purchases of a limited quantity sale, and knowingly purchasing a mispriced item were deemed more unacceptable when there was concern about the degree of harm arising from either situation. At the opposite end of the spectrum, only one behavior was unaffected by either variable. For the act of returning worn clothing for a refund – or deshopping – neither the size of the loss nor the size of the victimized organization influenced the respondents' opinions regarding that behavior. Interestingly, this was one of the most strongly criticized actions addressed in this study.

Four of the behaviors were found to be associated with the size of the victim, but not the size of the loss. In each situation, more sympathy was directed towards the smaller victims. These actions were those of returning a purchased item to the wrong store, borrowing a friend's museum membership card, knowingly purchasing a counterfeit item, and showrooming. It may be a case of no discernible victim. The final cell of the matrix comprises the three EQBs where the size of the loss impacted attitudes, but the size of the victim did not. They are stealing from one's employer, inflating a loss on an insurance claim, and – somewhat surprisingly – fibbing to secure a senior discount. Table 3 provides an overview of these findings.

Table 3. A Concurrent Look at the Two Size Variables

		Size of the Victimized Organization	
		Yes	**No**
Size of Loss	**Yes**	keep extra change not report shoplifter multiple visits to store purchase mispriced item	steal from employer inflate insurance loss fib for senior discount
	No	return item to wrong store borrow membership card purchase counterfeit item showrooming	return worn clothing

Discussion

Consistent with the situational nature of consumer ethics, attitudes are influenced by numerous criteria. This research has shown that both the size of the victimized organization's loss and the size of the organization itself have the potential to influence consumer opinions for most EQBs. Consumers seem to feel a degree of empathy, perhaps sympathy, when the perceived level of harm is high. This perception comes from two criteria: the organization is small and the size of the loss is large. In either case, the degree of harm appears to be significant enough to influence one's opinion. But it is not universal. In the majority of cases, one variable impacts those opinions, but the other does not. In only one case was neither variable found to exhibit a relationship with one's assessment of the behavior's level of acceptance. And that was for one of the overall most disdained of the 12 actions. It was considered to be wrong irrespective of the levels of the two predictor variables.

Interestingly, when the focus was on the size of the loss, there was a pattern of significance for which meaningful differences were most commonly associated with the more criticized behaviors. Conversely, when shifting to look at the size of the victimized organization, it was the behaviors that tended to be less criticized where significant differences were observed. These facts may signify that a look at the main effects and potential interaction between the two predictor variables will yield meaningful results.

The concurrent look at the two size variables provides some anecdotal evidence of the presence of main effects and potential interaction as mediators of attitudes regarding questionable consumer actions in the marketplace. This information could be important to marketers as it might identify at-risk situations. Knowing you are at risk should allow strategic safeguards to be implemented so as to reduce the potential of consumer misbehavior. Therefore, it has been decided that the next phase of this research will explore the main effects and interaction with more sophisticated analytical techniques.

Conclusions

Size matters. Consumers taking advantage of small organizations are viewed more harshly by the general public. Their actions are also viewed more critically when their questionable action results in a larger loss for the organization. There also appears to be an interaction element germane to the potential influence of the two size-related variables. This issue needs to be further explored so as to provide better insight to organizations so that they might better recognize risky situations and implement strategies designed to reduce that risk accordingly.

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